II

In retrospect, it seemed so natural
to ask Heavenly Father for advice
directly, Joseph wondered he had not
already done so. Never had he knelt
in prayer, never addressed the God of Love
except through intermediaries like
the Reverend Beeston. Opening a fresh,
uninterrupted stream of discourse with
his Maker would recast the nature of
his interactions with creation, and,
he thought, *Why shouldn't I enjoy a new,*
original relationship with all
the universe? Why not discover true
religion in a revelation? God
has given me his word to answer and
disclose and open all; all this if I
will only ask and seek and knock!

He knelt
to pray, yet found himself unable to
articulate his want of wisdom with
the riptide snores of Senior sawing through
his consciousness like clock-work every six
seconds. Knees bent, he cast his eyes about
in search of some more silent corner of
the cabin but concluded quickly that
his only opportunity for peace
and quiet lay outside, away from the
reverberations of a nose whose size

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and oblong cavities created an
acoustic space unrivalled till the rise
of Brigham's Tabernacle. Joseph left
their home and headed for the well; his tongue
felt thick and rubbery, but water would
relieve its sluggishness and help him to
address the Lord with eloquence. He walked
along a kind of corridor, the cows
chewing their cud intently on his right
and on his left, the wagon—

CRACK!

He felt
the first ball whistle past his fingertips
and heard the bullet thud behind him—heard
a bovine victim bellow at the bite
of lead. These sensory perceptions raced
through Joseph's nervous system to his brain,
and that deductive organ noted that
recorded data seemed consistent with
the symptoms of a gunshot, but, he, dazed,
stood still some moments, moving only when
the other shoe dropped, and he realized that
the shot was meant for him. He lurched back,

CRACK!

the second missile missing him by scant
inches as Joseph turned and sprinted for
the house. Inside, he roused his parents, who,
in truth, were half awake already thanks
to the report of the assassin's gun.
Incredulous at first, they listened to
his tale with fear. Then, trembling, they rejoiced
in the miraculous deliverance
of Joseph from his unseen enemies.
Determined to effect the physical
salvation of her children, Lucy pressed
her husband to wake Alvin and devise
a plan to rout the rifleman before
he could wreak havoc on their cabin. He

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persuaded her of this scenario's
unlikely nature and convinced her to
accept the better part of valor as
the soundest principle on which to plan
resistance. Armed with naught but courage and
his cudgel, Father Smith assumed a post
beside the door, then waved his wife and son
to sleep. But guard-work grows monotonous,
and soon the poor man's feet rebelled. They led
him to a chair and bade him sit. He, loathe
to disobey, complied, and soon his eyes
made muster in the mutiny. They closed,
leaving the house with no defense save his
return to somnorific thunderings.

Outside? Outside, the grass grew damply chill,
and Caleb Howard staggered to his feet
from where he'd bedded, hidden underneath
the wagon. Low on liquid courage, his
desire to take revenge against the Smiths
came coughing to a stop, sobriety
and sanity returning slowly as
the engine of his inner devil seized
without its motive power. Howard shook
his head, disturbed that he had risked a swing
on gallows hill to claim his pound of flesh
for unpaid debt now four years old. So what
if Lucy left him short of Utica
with less to line his pockets than a man
might hope for? He had been prepared to do
the same to her, and killing crippled Joe
now seemed a silly way to salve his pride;
the only thing a corpse could buy him was
a hempen necktie, cinched too tight to suit
his taste. He wondered as he took his leave,
*What demon had possessed me to behave
so?*

Well, as Crankstool disentangled his
ethereal existence from the soul
of Howard with a sigh, he cursed the cold

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return of incorporeality
and gnashed his teeth. But Caleb never heard
the dressing down he gave to Grumblebut,
a spectre charged with Howard's personal
damnation: "No mistakes with that one, dolt,
or Low Command will carve your ass in chunks,
stack 'em on spits, and serve you up as shish
kebab for supper in the mess hall. He's
as good as ours unless he gets a jolt
of camp religion. Men like Howard will
persist in sin until the day they wake
encircled in the welcoming embrace
of their true Brother Down Below. Just keep
the human happy with his pint of ale
and far away from those revivals. Most
men will do more to damn themselves and weak-
willed neighbors in the Enemy's own name
than any other way; the multitude
of churches is at present one of our
best assets, but the safest course to take
with loyal men like him is to preserve
their ignorance of *all* religion, false
though it may be."

Here Crankstool might have launched
into a dissertation on the great
divorce between the Church and churches, Christ
and crucifixes, but his audience
was growing antsy watching Howard's form
diminish in the distant darkness, so
he truncated his admonition to
the novice Temptor at a tenth of its
intended length and gave poor Grumblebut
the chance to extricate himself. Yet when
the weaker devil opened up his mouth
to speak, he found himself cut off at once.

"Still here?" snarled Crankstool. "I'm not flattered by
your insincere attentions to my rank.
If you have better things to do, then say
so; don't just stand there sniveling because
a Lesser Temptor on assignment from

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the Lowerarchy happens to address
you. Now, be off, before I off you on
my own account!"

At Crankstool's feint towards
the pale-cheeked fiend, he cringed—then bolted to
the north in hot pursuit of Howard. With
a smirk of self-congratulation wrapped
around his face, the Lesser Temptor turned
away from Grumblebut's retreating shade,
already readying his speech for the
debriefing due to Seinvalore. He made
the half-mile journey from the cabin to
their designated rendezvous with time
to spare, astride a brisk wind blowing south-
southeast, a special perk reserved for those
about the Prince of Air's most pressing work.
But Crankstool had no time to revel in
this sign of his own self-importance; soon
as he set foot inside the chosen copse,
the stench of Seinvalore's sulfuric breath
besieged his nostrils.

"Listen, shit-for-brains:
whatever else you do or say in there,
don't start expounding on 'pure spirit' and
the 'pressure of the ordinary,' 'cause
if I catch heat for your pet theories, I'll
promote your kisser up to President-
in-Training of the scum that lick my boots,
and you can spend eternity with tread
marks on your tongue." Then Seinvalore stepped back,
assessing Crankstool's features with a grunt:
"At least you look half-way demonic." Close
again, more urgently, he whispered: "This
is big, could mean demotion for the both
of us, so don't forget your manners. If
they sit to honor you—"

But Seinvalore's
last piece of practical advice fell short
of the bewildered Crankstool's ears. He still

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had no idea what Seinvalore had meant,
accosting him as soon as he stepped in
the copse, and lost all opportunity
to question the Inferior or hear
his final admonition when two strapped
thug-uglies, wearing the insignia
of Satan's privy council, came and dragged
him off, without a word of warning. Two
lone icebergs, bobbing in a pair of black
seas, each impaled by lightning, bracketed
his field of vision, steering Crankstool's sight
and feet. He marched through pines and other weeds
grown thick enough to stifle light. In cool
of night he walked, between twin brands upon
the shoulders of his captors, bracing for
an inquisition, there, among the trees.
No need for fig leaves; he'd done nothing that
the Glacietigni could object to. Why
the devils charged with Earth's destruction thought
a measly Lesser Temptor merited
such scrutiny he couldn't guess, but dreams
of falling into power drew him on.

As much as Crankstool had expected to
see Moloch, Loki, or Uriakeep—
some single representative of Low
Command's most humble body—nothing had
prepared him for the scene that met his view
when he emerged from out the underbrush
and shot into a clearing, still propelled
by his two minders.

Like Da Vinci's Christ,
surrounded by his Glacietigni, there
sat Satan, at a mossy oaken log
whose massive bulk divided this small space
devoid of undergrowth in two. Once green
and vital, tall as any other tree
surrounding (save the cedar that the Smiths
had cut the day before, whose stump now stood
between Satan and Crankstool, oozing sap

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FIGURE 3. "Satan's Congress in the Grove." Godwin.

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and water from the hatchet in its side,
where Joseph had secured, and left, his tool),
the fallen oak now teemed with termites, ants,
and other harbingers of inward rot,
its prone black bulk a husk of eminence
decayed. So Satan, sitting at the log
supremely unaware—and unaware
because supreme—of any irony
in his position, supervised the fiend's
debriefing personally, confident
his presence (an implicit threat of harsh
interrogation methods) would dissuade
the Lesser Temptor from dissembling.

"Did the boy begin his prayer?"

"Complete it?"

"How
did you distract him?"

"Is his zealousness
above the Sauline threshold?"

"Calculate
his martyr coefficient."

"Is he prone
to deep abstractions?"

"Will he pray again?"

The council's questions fell on Crankstool's ears
like body blows, jabs probing for the flaws
in Joseph's character and Crankstool's work.
He sparred with skill, massaging numbers to
produce the answers that he thought would please
them all and seemed successful, even grew
a little cocky in the seconds just
before that sucker punch connected with
his jaw.

The question, Satan's first and last,
his one inquiry—"Will he pray again?"—
knocked Crankstool cold. He understood the stakes

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of such a question, for himself and for
the Smith boy too. The last time Satan had
shown interest in the prayers of an obscure
young man, the Son of God was crucified,
and Hell reaped such a surfeit of remorse
and sorrow, pain and anguish, that the stores
seemed inexhaustible, apparently
still undiminished after almost two
millennia of feasting. Crankstool knew
the boy was good as dead already, or
at least, like Job, would wish for death in lieu
of Satan's rabid wrath. As for himself,
Crankstool had the audacity to hope
that he could parlay his position as
the council's current link to Joseph, its
raison d'etre, into some more permanent
relationship, with all the privileges
that his demotion would entail. Before
the sound of Satan's voice had died from off
his lips, all this had flashed through Crankstool's mind
like lightning. Dazzling prospects, these abrupt,
but welcome, glimpses left him blinded twice:
first, whelmed with affirmation of his own
significance, and then, consumed by thoughts
of future glory.

Lost in vanity's
labyrinth, Crankstool soon provoked the ire
of his interrogator, who assumed
the Lesser Temptor's silence was a sign
of perfidy. With mounting wrath, the first
to fall arose and towered over all
below. The tallest, broadest, fairest, most
imposing form of all God's sons lacked none
of its original perfection save
a light which issues from the eyes of all
who worship Elohim with singleness
of heart. Except for this, the visage of
that spirit formerly called Lucifer
remained unaltered, and except for this
the *David* wrought by Michelangelo

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would do the deeds of its original.
The harrowed brow, the lips pressed tight, the vein
that throbbed within his neck: these signs betrayed
an anger bubbling up like molten rock
inside the Serpent, but his voice was cloaked
in velvet and concealed his venomed fangs
from view.

In *sotto voce*, Satan spoke,
reiterating his request: "I'll ask
once more. Do you believe the boy will try
to pray again?" But Crankstool never heard
the words, or hearing, failed to comprehend
their import, contemplating even then
rewards as yet unearned. To be ignored
not once but twice was more than Satan's pride
could bear; with one swift bound he hurdled past
the log that was his judgment bar and struck
the Lesser Temptor with a backhand stroke
which sent his insubstantial substance through
the air—his flight arrested by a more
particularly particled sylvain
of fir.

Then, ranting, stamping, Satan howled
above his victim: "Answer me!" He cursed
and kicked and clawed at Crankstool, who, it must
be said, at least had sense enough to know
resistance would be nocuous and lead
to greater efforts on the part of his
attacker. Crankstool also curbed the urge
to beg for mercy, lest he stimulate
the Snake's sadistic streak. Instead, he fell
to self-abasement, loudly pleading his
unworthiness so as to minimize
whatever satisfaction this abuse
provided his interrogator.

"Thank
you, Lowest of the Low—I am not fit
to be the object of your thoughts, much less
the target of a personal assault!

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You humble me too much; do not exalt
yourself—your office—by consorting with
the likes of me unnecessarily.
I am not worthy!" These and similar
self-deprecating comments issued forth
from Crankstool, underneath the subject of
his sycophancy, pleading interspersed
with groans and gasps and cries of pain.

At last,
hunger for adulation sated and
his wrath abated, Satan stood again—
again demanded satisfaction from
the Lesser Temptor: "Denizen, you know
your failure to respond with promptness to
the questions asked you by myself, your Least
Executive, concerning Smith's attempt
at prayer, is tantamount to treason, and
it constitutes a clear and present threat
to our republic. Answer now and spare
yourself the capital displeasure of
the people, or resign the right of due
process and face summary judgment by
the legally elected officers
before you."

Crankstool, still with hopes his tongue
might extricate him from his current straits,
and not confiding overmuch in rights
or processes, relied instead on law,
on Crankstool's own first law of pride, in fact,
which held that egos set in motion tend
to stay in motion, following the path
of highest praise without regard for their
trajectory or destination. Like
the music of a pungi, Crankstool's voice,
both grating and ingratiating, rose
with reedy importunity to plead
its master's cause, and prove his theorem too:
"The glory of your presence underwhelmed
me, Humble Tovarishch. Your circumspect

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demeanor and the muted tones in which
you spoke; your patience with my questioners
(who failed to ask the vital thing) and me
(who failed to answer); your superior
physique, concealed until sheer urgency
made modesty a lesser virtue: all
contributed to my paralysis
when you addressed me first. How to respond
to such deliberate elocution, such
reluctant leadership? Though all in Hell
are equal, all acknowledge you are more
than equal; and, as there is nothing so
unequal as the equal treatment of
unequals, how was I to answer your
address? Thus, lost in contemplation of
your selfless service and perfect example,
not knowing whether I should speak to you
according to your artificial, though
sincere, pretensions to equality
or with the deference naturally due
your low desserts—thus, I neglected to
disclose the information you had asked
of me. Yes, Joseph will assuredly
attempt to pray again, tomorrow night
if not before. If you intend to stop
him or to redirect his energies
in less ascendant enterprises, haste
is needed."

Crankstool stopped, and Satan smiled,
baring his teeth with wolfish appetite.
At this, the Lesser Temptor shrank, afraid
his flattery had failed; but martyrs love
to be confirmed in their own sense of self-
determined singularity above
all else, and heaven's first martyr was no
exception. Joseph was the object of
his gluttonous grin, and Crankstool's error had
already been forgotten by the Snake.
Without another thought for Crankstool—who
retreated, unimpeded, to observe

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the scene in relative obscurity,
behind the trees that ringed the clearing—and
with palpable emotion, Satan turned
to face the council.

"Since we slew the Son
and his apostles and assumed control,
through Constantine, of church government, we
have known this day would come, that one year our
Great Enemy would make another bid
for power, jealous as he is, as he
admits to being, even of our poor,
modest demesnes among his numberless
infinities of worlds. Although we foiled
his previous attempts—the Lutheran Ruse,
the Muslim Gambit—those coulés were feints,
not passes truly seeking to restore
hegemony. The Smith boy represents
our first rencounter since the Son's ascent"—
Which overturned the devils' false belief
that flesh and blood are universally
subjected to their grave decrees, but which
had also left the vast majority
of souls under their sway intact; and what
good shepherd muses on a single lost
Lamb when the ninety-nine lie hobbled safe
within the valley's shadows, shielded from
the sun's bright rays?—"and we must make a show
of power, demonstrate that humankind
are subject still and always unto Death
and Hell. This Joseph, like the first, is meant
to raise a servile nation: subjects for
the Tyrant, who, unlike the people of
Melchizedek and Enoch, whose entire
aim was escaping us, will seek instead
to overthrow our humble enclave of
equality and annex it for him
who is already omnipossident
otherwise. Not content with herds and flocks
of numberless expanse and infinite
variety, he covets that which we

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possess, our one, our only little ewe
lamb, Earth. Make no mistake: In Smith we face
an existential threat. Although the boy
has yet to lift his voice in prayer, much less
his arms in combat, we have no choice but
to strike preemptively, to undermine
his power to wage war in future and
defend our world from gravest danger. If
the Tyrant has elected to enlist
women and children in the vanguard, he
alone must answer for the casualties
incurred, for these and all atrocities
against the people he pretends to love
so much. The advent of our ancient foe
from heaven, Zachiel, was written in
the stars some fourteen years ago, and Thoth
assures me that this Joseph is the one
foretold, the seventh and the last of our
Great Enemy's archangels to receive
a body. Even the Almighty has
a limited supply of champions
with which to challenge our dominion in
this realm of matter, and if we can claim
a conquest over Zachiel—this Smith
boy—we will have withstood the Tyrant's last,
best hope of conquering this haven from
his heavenly control. Our object, then,
is this: to do with Smith as we have done
with every agent of imperial
ambition. How to thwart, destroy, distract,
deceive, or otherwise dissuade him from
accomplishing the will of Heaven? That,
distinguished comrades, is the question you
must answer and the reason I convened
this congress."

Like the angler hidden in
a bush's leafy depths to shield himself
from both the unsuspecting fish he seeks
to hook and the more vigilant, if less
than honest, eyes of wardens who themselves

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enjoy a bass fillet or pan-seared trout
whenever they believe the master's gaze
is elsewhere, Satan trod with tact where none
was needed, speaking to his most depraved
companions with that same calumnious art
that first seduced them from the Father's side,
as if he could no longer separate
himself from the façade of righteous ire
and indignation he had worn so long,
to such effect. But if this serpent seemed
intractable, unable to evolve
and far less flexible than exegetes
or herpetologists might have supposed,
his councilors were just as firmly fixed
in former ways. All present understood
that Satan would eventually be sent,
alone, to face the Smith boy, as he had
been sent so many times already—to
the Son, to Job, to Adam—although each
successive trial seemed less fruitful than
the one before.

But nonetheless, they all
would play the parts that they had acted out
in every iteration of that first
demonic council one more time. The same
three fiends would speak again—brash, bellicose
Moloch, the softly slothful Belial,
and avaricious Mammon—plus a fourth,
Erotika. (Her elevation to
this speaking role came only when she learned
that Adam had rebuffed and Eve embraced
temptation; she then raised Hell's feminine
minority—all twelve point five percent—
in protest of the Lowerarchy's glass
floor. She demanded that those epithets
for female spirits—*Daughter*, *Sister*, *Wife*,
Mother—be stricken from the records and
replaced with terms identifying them
as independent agents loyal to
the Revolution—*Temptress*, *Demoness*,

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She-Devil, *Bitch*, etc.—and that
the constitution be amended to
establish an equality of rights
without regard for gender; women's rights
have never been so popular on Earth
as Eve's transgression made them, then, in Hell.
Thus, when the Glacietigni next convened,
the night of Abel's baptism, she joined
that body as its thirteenth member and
advised, on that occasion, incest: foul
seduction by Eve's daughters.) Each debate,
a ritual: the same four fiends would speak;
Beelzebub would ask a volunteer
to take the mission on; and Satan would
stand forth to offer up his services,
reluctantly.

No change in Hell, where back-
room politics would shape the outcome in
this hundred-and-eleventh council as
they had in the original. No need
for some new secret combination when
the first had worked so well; far better to
maintain the status quo with hackneyed, stale,
run-of-the-mill tongue-wagging than disrupt
traditions with predictable returns
on investment for novel words of an
exotic derivation. Why pursue
things unattempted yet in prose, when few
of those in Hell who'd learned to read would make
the trip—no middle flight—to archives where
the meeting's minutes would decay, in far
Bibliadurus, knowing fewer still
would have the patience, time, and skill to parse
such records and admire rhetorical
refinements made throughout the years? Each spoke,
without an audience, at present or
in future, not for fame but from a sense
of duty to a nation and a way
of life besieged by what appeared to be
an overwhelming power: Belial,
Mammon, Erotika, and Moloch.

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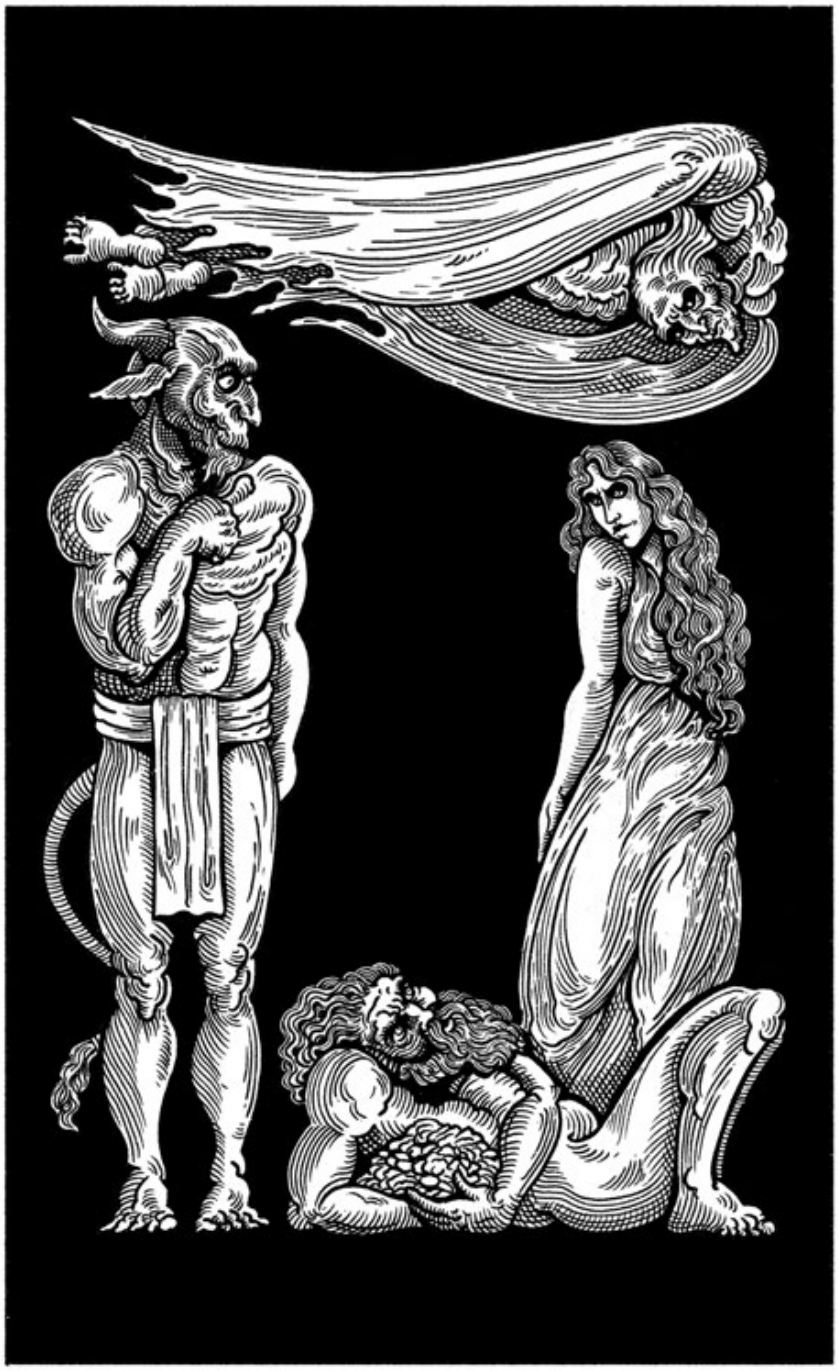

FIGURE 4. "A Council of Devils." Godwin.

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With
a languid grace and smile urbane, that first
arose to speak again in favor of
ignoble ease: “Emergencies, dear friends
and colleagues, seldom seem more urgent than
when hasty, desperate measures meant to end
a conflict fail, inciting panic in
the hearts of those who lose the battle and
emboldening its victors. Tactical
defeats destroy morale, but tactical
retreats advance strategic purposes.
They breed complacency within our foes.
No sense preparing plans for an attack
in which success seems dubious at best;
omnipotence must be massaged, out-flanked,
not openly assaulted. Like a small,
innocuous animalcule whose full
potential as an agent of disease
can only be unlocked by contact with
an antipharmic that attacks it and
provokes the germ to mutate into some
more deadly, more resilient version of
itself, this Smith boy is a dormant threat,
a muscle-bound pubescent fraction of
the spirit who commanded heaven’s hosts,
and nothing will restore his former strength
and pugnative demeanor faster than
our opposition. Even if he prays,
what worst could happen? Say the Tyrant deigns
to answer—which he seldom does—and makes
the boy a second Samuel; some Saul
or David will defect and nullify
his contribution to the heavenly
campaign. Or say he somehow finds, decodes,
and prints the golden Bible buried now
inside Cumorah—not a likely feat;
Herr Gutenberg, Jerome, and John will all
conspire to damn the boy for adding to
the words of Revelation. Outcomes so
wildly improbable are hardly worth
averting; haven’t Heaven’s miracles

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been met with apathy in every age?
Reforms, initiated in response
to the miraculous, decline and fail
because the mortal flesh our Foe's so keen
on cannot hold an edge unless it's kept
in constant contact with the grindstone, and
one prayer, whatever its immediate
effect, can have no lasting impact on
the boy's development; he will forget
and soon return to foolish errors, to
the weaknesses of youth and foibles of
his human nature. Sacrifice this pawn.
Permit his prayer, and we will soon recoup
attendant short-term losses. But, if we
contest it, fearing present costs, we risk
awakening a spirit foreordained
to curb our freedoms—risk creating that
same enemy we plot now to destroy."

To which the crusty Mammon made his now
traditional rejoinder: "To propose
procrastination seems appropriate
if in the service of some larger plan,
but Belial's indefinite delays
sound too much like our potent Enemy's
own propaganda, like Gamaliel's
soft, optimistic fatalism. Our
best interests must be earned, not languidly
awaited. Let us speak of dividends,
discharging prejudice against the gold
plates of Cumorah. Nothing will destroy
the poor and innocent more quickly than
discovering some brave new world of wealth,
and I suggest that we allow the boy—
even encourage him—to search until
he finds the record. Poverty will lead
him to regard those golden leaves for their
pecuniary, not veridical,
potential, and the Tyrant—who detests
all those that seek to profit from the sale
of sacred gifts, as Simon Magus might

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attest—should be enraged enough at his
idolatry to disavow the boy
entirely, even strike him dead. And if
Joseph somehow survives this first, innate
attraction to the earth that gave him form
and substance, want will soon convince him that
it were no sin to use his talents to
discover other treasures, buried for
less holy purposes. No man who's seen
the gleam of gold emerging from the ground
can ever be content to till the land
for daily bread; a money-digger once,
a money-digger always. Let him find
the record; let him try to reconstruct
the blessed state that it describes and build
Utopia. Those plates will bind him to
our cause as firmly as the golden nail
that fastened Hebrew servants to the door
post of their master's house—no place so sure
to foster greed as paradise. A poor
young man wants nothing more than to grow up
a rich old man, but poverty promotes
humility unless persuaded that
prosperity is possible. The love
of money will afflict him, as it pained
poor Solomon, but only if he learns
to trust in gold—and solitary weeks
spent reading and recording stories that
are written on the stuff will teach him to
regard that metal as a sacred source
of safety and society."

He sat;
Erotika rose next and turned to face
the hardened members of that devilish
assembly with a mocking smile: "I see
no reason to expose this record to
the peepings of a boy who drives the plough.
Do men want *nothing* more than gold? As I
recall, the deviance of Solomon
had more to do with how he spent his wealth

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than an unnatural attraction to
the jewels and precious metals that comprised
it. To be sure, he built a temple for
the Tyrant, but, being a democrat
at heart, he broadened that first ritual
embrace of Yahweh to include diverse
religious voices representative
of all the cultures and ethnicities
within his kingdom and erected halls
of worship for each one of us as well.
Must I remind you of the cause for this
enlarged conception of the sacred? Look
no further! Certainly not lust for gold—
no need to send him rooting in a dirt
hole for the mines of Ophir when the boy,
like Solomon and every other man,
would so much rather plumb the fleshy depths
of female . . . hearts. Forget the shafts extolled
by Mammon's metal fetish, and reflect
instead on that great boon our Enemy
bequeathed us in the feminine mystique,
that antipole to which the needles of
men's inner compasses are magnetized.
No reason to reorient the boy's
worldview by rubbing this gold Bible in
his face as though it were a lodestone which
could make him come to our side; he just needs
a sextant whose anatomy will help
interpret the external workings of
that compass—needs an Eve whose wanton curls
and murmuring lips will hale the eye and bid
a man forsake his God. No—better yet,
a host of women eager to assist
him in the labor of delivering
the Tyrant's children and fulfilling his
command to multiply. Ask Abraham
how well the handmaid Hagar shared a bed
with Sarah. Press that liar, Jacob, as
to whether a plurality of wives
promotes familial peace and unity.
Most marriages transform the beautiful

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to commerce and dissension in less time
than rutting animals require to pledge
their mutual affection; bigamy
just guarantees the process, and if we
can introduce contemporary role
models whose rationales for wedding more
than one woman will give him cover, lust
will prove the boy's undoing."

With a voice
less certain than insinuating, she
trailed off, as though she were unwilling or
unable to escort her logic to
its climax; Moloch, stiff and tumid, like
his peers, from sitting rigidly erect
so long, shot up as soon as she had done
and glared disdainfully at each of those
who had already spoken as he paced
frenetically across the clearing—once,
twice, thrice—before erupting into speech:
"Have we learned nothing from the Enemy's
last great assault? This half-assed shit just does
not work! If we expect to stop that boy
from winning here on earth the war he waged
against us while in heaven, then we can't
content ourselves with sowing seeds of sin
as though he were some second Eutychus;
another Ananias; or a male
companion for those silly women Paul
condemned. Among the feeble masses, such
an emphasis on peccadilloes—sly
inertness, greed, and lust—might satisfice.
But Zachiel, if this is he, has zeal
enough for fifty men and cannot be
expected to abandon heaven's cause
because he sees some wench with shiny hair
or finds a bit of buried gold. To hear
you talk, the boy has less in common with
the spirit whose swift daggers drove us down
to Hell than with a color-blind raccoon
that can't resist the trapper's bright tin bait,

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and to ensnare him all we need are lures
of a sufficient size and luster. Don't
delude yourselves! Whatever weaknesses
our over-zealous cousin has acquired
with his new flesh, a wandering eye is most
assuredly not one of them. As his
refusal to accept the platitudes
with which we've always pacified the poor
and pious demonstrates, this Joseph can
discern between the coin of heaven and
our counterfeit; what's more, his lust for God
is such as twixt a miser and his wealth
is found. His eyes are fixed on heaven, and
he wouldn't even see, much less forsake
his faith to follow, your intended lures
of leisure; treasure; pleasure. Rather than
attempt to turn his tunnel vision to
another end, we would be wiser to
exploit the lack of parallax that mars
the sight of single-minded souls. All filled
with thoughts of heaven, he will scarcely pause
to question whether his Cyclopean
aggression may have executed God's
titanic will before the latter days
demand—until his proud and pugnative
demeanor, galled to rage by our assaults
against his character and followers
and cause, erupts in wrath and oversteps
the limits of his Master's leash with bold,
offensive sallies. Thus, by goading him
with countless minor cruelties of the kind
our Enemy so unrealistically
expects his servants to endure without
complaint shall we, at length, incite the boy
to some vain shows of military might
unauthorized by heaven. Demagogues
will slander him as an American
Mohammed seeking to convert, debauch,
and subjugate by sanguinary means,
and every freeman in the land will fight
with us against the restoration of

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a tyrant governing by 'divine right.'
Without the arm of heaven to sustain
his sword or popular opinion to
protect his reputation, we can cut
him down like a green, unripe thistle when
we please, and certainly before the sharp-
barbed blossoms of his gospel can disperse
too broadly. Let us make a martyr of
him; neither hagiography nor the
idolatry that martyrs always breed
are antithetical to our designs.
But more importantly, a soldier can't
surrender: if we want to neutralize
this last great threat, the boy must die."

The war-
monger retreated, sat, and Hades nudged
Beelzebub back into consciousness.
He hadn't heard the whole debate, but then,
he knew his lines by heart and answered each
of the preceding speakers perfectly,
according to their character, before
expounding on the need for one among
them to prevail in single combat with
this slave of the Almighty, as a proof
of their superiority. A roll-
call vote approved his motion unopposed,
and Lucifer was nominated for
the task, an invitation he took up
reluctantly—as always. Then, adjourned,
the council members went their separate ways,
to wait their Least Executive's next call.

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